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Naval Operational Art in the Battle for Norway: Success in  
1940 and Application in 1995

by

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The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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## Abstract

The Germans achieved operational success in Operation WESEREUBUNG through detailed planning, joint operations and singular purpose. The German navy, numerically inferior and incapable of large fleet operations succeeded in their overall operational plan. They were able to land troops in Norway by applying Corbett's theory of sea control. The British were unsuccessful against the Germans due to a lack of operational planning and effective leadership. German success of 1940 is discussed in relationship to the United States of 1995. Two potential threats for the US are examined.

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A classic example of how a country can achieve military success at the operational level of war was the German invasion of Norway. Operation WESEREUBUNG, conducted in the Spring of 1940, combined the three services of the German military and focused them in one direction - the overthrow of the Norwegian and Danish government and the pacification of the northern theater of Europe under German control. This paper will concentrate on the German naval plan of operations, whose fleet was numerically inferior to the Allied navies and incapable of conducting large scale operations. The German ingredients for success in the naval operational level of warfare will then be applied to the United States in 1995 and its role as a naval and global superpower.

#### **GERMANY: SUCCESS**

Initial German interest in Norway originated during World War I, particularly the navy. German national security depended on the Scandinavian countries. During the intervening war years, 1919 - 1939, the German navy expressed concerns about Germany's ability to maintain Swedish exports flowing through Norway's ports to Germany. The German navy also desired operational naval bases along the Norwegian coast for four reasons: they would relieve reliance upon the Atlantic coast bases for its navy; they would maintain lines of communications through the Kattegat and Skagerrak; they would prevent the British from operating in that

region; and they would isolate Russia except through the northern route, which would be vulnerable to German units operating from Norwegian bases.<sup>1</sup>

The German navy felt they had learned significant lessons from World War I. Norway was a key component of their strategic plans prior to Hitler declaring war on Poland in September of 1939. The navy believed the hunger blockade which led to their defeat in WWI was aided by Norwegian mine fields. They believed they were prevented from successful open ocean operations by the lack of access to Norwegian bases which would allow escape from the landlocked North Sea.<sup>2</sup> Norwegian ports were also an integral part of their strategy for blockade runners seeking refuge from the British fleet while providing advantages for the Great Fleet the German Naval Staff envisioned for 1943.

However, soon after the capitulation of Poland, Hitler determined Germany's first priority was a strike to the west in an attempt to seize Holland, Belgium and Northern France. While Hitler's attention went into the planning for this event, the Naval Staff continued to study and develop plans for Norway and its potential for naval bases. When Hitler became aware of pro-German sentiment resident in Norway and the possibilities of a pro-German government, he was forced to redirect some of his

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<sup>1</sup> Klaus Maier and others, eds., Germany and the Second World War, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991) pp. 182 - 185.

<sup>2</sup> Earl F. Ziemke, The German Northern Theater of Operations 1940 - 1945, (Washington, DC, 1959), p. 4.

energies to that region. He was also concerned about British intentions for this part of Europe when Germany finally attacked the west.

The German Naval Staff earnestly began its planning in January 1940 under the direction of its Commander in Chief, Admiral Raeder. This occurred shortly after the Oberkommando der Wehrmacht's (OKW - Armed Forces High Command) *Studie Nord* on Norway had been released to the services. In a short period the navy made some recommendations which were later incorporated in the plan eventually executed by the navy in April, 1940. The navy established minimal threat from the Norwegian navy and assumed no threat from Norway's coastal batteries. However, they stressed the need for complete surprise to prevent the British navy from intercepting the offensive forces as they made their way to Norway.

The Naval Staff realized there was a problem in transporting troops from Germany to Norway. Two options were studied. First, embark the troops on merchant shipping. But the numbers necessary for success would diminish the element of surprise required for the operation. Second, the troops could be embarked on warships. This option severely restricted the amount of troops, supplies and equipment for transportation. Their final

plan included a recommendation to the General Staff for a course of action incorporating both options.<sup>3</sup>

Hitler once again took charge of the plan for Norway with his personal staff in the OKW upon conclusion of the naval review. Fortunately for the navy, the principal staff officer assigned to the plan was a naval officer, Captain Theodor Krancke. Under his guidance the plan incorporated many of the recommendations put forward by the Naval Staff.

Guidance for Operation WESEREUBUNG was provided succinctly by Hitler throughout the planning stages to his personal staff which then filtered down to the individual service staffs. The strategic objectives were to prevent Britain from taking offensive action in Scandinavia and the Baltic Sea; ensure Swedish iron ore continued to flow to Germany; and provide naval and air bases for operations against Britain.<sup>4</sup> The German Naval Staff then translated these objectives into an operational scheme supporting the landings and occupation of Norway.

Operation WESEREUBUNG was conducted with limited resources in a secondary region. The attack to the west was the primary focus for Hitler and the German General Staff. This proved to be a beneficial tool for the Naval Staff. The attack to the west did not rely on naval support, which allowed free access to the fleet for operations against Norway. Additionally, the number of

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp. 10 - 13.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 17 - 18.

troops requiring transport in the initial stages by the navy was reduced because most of the army would be allocated to the western operation. Thirdly, surprise, a tenet of the initial naval plans was paramount to success since it was a small force.

Norway's population and economic life was concentrated in and along the coast and were easily separated by natural barriers.<sup>5</sup> Norway's center of gravity was its government located in Oslo. Germany believed Oslo's separation from the rest of the country was a critical vulnerability. It could be attacked easily, thereby crippling the country militarily and politically.

If the Norwegians could not be induced to surrender the country peacefully, speed was imperative. Because of the geographic situation, the naval plan required simultaneous attacks on six major geographic regions (to include major cities) by naval forces with troops embarked and by air assault at airports near Oslo along the coast. Surprise and timing was integral to the naval portion of Operation WESEREUBUNG. Some of the transports carrying troops and supplies departed Germany days prior to the warships getting under way to ensure they were able to support the landings along the coast.

The Germans understood their navy was numerically inferior to the British. Admiral Raeder issued a report to Hitler summarizing his assessment prior to the Norwegian operation:

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<sup>5</sup> J. L. Moulton, The Norwegian Campaign of 1940, (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1966), p. 52.

"The operation is in itself contrary to all principles in the theory of naval warfare. According to this theory, it could be carried out by us only if we had naval supremacy. We do not have this; on the contrary, we are carrying out the operation in the face of a vastly superior British fleet. In spite of this the C-in-C Navy believes that, provided surprise is complete, our troops can and will successfully be transported to Norway. On many occasions in the history of war those very operations have been successful which went against all the principles of warfare, provided they were carried out by surprise."<sup>6</sup>

Surprise was important, but naval supremacy was available to the Germans based on the Corbettian theory of local sea control.<sup>7</sup> There was no need for the Germans to have total control of the seas and they were incapable of accomplishing this feat. However, through surprise, the German navy could and would obtain supremacy in the local area long enough for German troops to land in Norway. Singularly important in this fact is Germany's ability to focus on the strategic objective - the capture of Norway. When the navy suffered tactical losses, some very dramatic and numerically shocking, they remained focused. They realized tactical defeats at sea would not by itself create an operational defeat for the Germans.

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<sup>6</sup> Moulton, p. 65.

<sup>7</sup> Julian S. Corbett, Some Principles of Maritime Strategy, (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1918), pp. 77 - 80.



The German naval success in the operation can be attributed to both its detailed plan and excellent execution of what is called operational art by US military planners and practitioners. Although not privy to the contemporary theory and analysis behind Naval Operational Art in 1995, the German Naval Staff succeeded in applying its techniques in 1939 - 1940. Krancke applied the principles of war based on the strategic objectives and limitations regarding Norway's occupation to achieve success.

#### **GREAT BRITAIN: FAILURE**

The British failed in Scandinavia from a lack of initiative and fortitude in choosing a course of action against the Germans. Churchill attempted to get the War Cabinet to take some action against the Germans immediately after Poland's defeat. Churchill also wanted to support Finland who was fighting the Soviet Union. He searched for opportunities to take action, or at least influence some events. Scandinavia appeared to be a perfect place to begin, as he was also a historian and well aware the role this geographic region played in WWI and its potential for the current conflict. After much pressure on the Cabinet, Churchill finally received permission less than two weeks prior to the German operation to mine the waters off the Norwegian coast.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ewart Brookes, Prologue to a War, (London: Jarrolds, 1966), pp. 20 - 21.

The British, even with Churchill's constant prodding to do something, failed to draft a cohesive operational plan for their intentions in Scandinavia. The British Fleet was the only superior military instrument available to the Allies in northern Europe to counter the German advances. Their various plans to help the Finns against the Soviets were without strategic or operational purpose, especially towards the end of Finnish resistance in late Spring of 1940. It relied on Norway and Sweden allowing troops across their borders in order to get to Finland, thereby involving them in the war. Second, and more importantly, the British and the French could not come to an agreement on their course of action.<sup>9</sup>

The end result of this debacle in Allied planning was a unilateral British decision. Two complementary plans were prepared to counter potential Norwegian support for the German effort in the region. Troops were embarked on warships in Scotland ready to pounce on the Germans if they invaded Norway (Narvik in particular) and they also finalized Churchill's plans to mine the waters around Norway. Churchill hoped mining the waters would provoke the Germans into making some desperate move in the region. For over six months, Churchill had attempted to take some action in Scandinavia to prevent the Germans from receiving their iron ore and to assist the Finns against the Soviets. However, it was not until the Germans had actually

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<sup>9</sup> Maier, ed., pp. 197 - 205.

landed on Norwegian soil that they were able to act with purpose.<sup>10</sup>

The British also had two significant faults which contributed to their inability to prevent the Germans from occupying Norway. First, there was a failure of intelligence, or more precisely, a failure in the analysis and dissemination of intelligence. The British knew the Germans were planning on taking action in Norway. By April 7, two days prior to the landings, the British had even told the Norwegians about German ships located off the Norwegian coast. The next day, the German merchant ship RIO DE JANEIRO was sunk with many German troops captured in Norwegian waters.<sup>11</sup> Intelligence about German Fleet actions prior to and during the operations was gathered by British aircraft and provided to both the British Admiralty and to Admiral Forbes, Commander-in-Chief, Home Fleet, underway in the North Sea.

In addition, the Admiralty received more information than Forbes. The information Forbes did receive initially confirmed in his mind the Germans were attempting to break out to the Atlantic.<sup>12</sup> So while additional information was available, it did not receive the proper analytic effort nor was it disseminated to where it would alter the courses of action taken operationally by Forbes.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ziemke, pp. 42 - 43.

<sup>12</sup> Brookes, p. 31.

The second deficiency which impacted on the British effort was a lack of unity of command, the failure to designate an overall operational commander. Forbes had significant resources available to him, but he was not completely in charge. Even official British records refuse to answer some controversies associated with guidance and operations throughout the Norwegian operation.<sup>13</sup> There was conflicting ideas as to what the Germans were up to on April 9. Both the Admiralty and Forbes were giving conflicting orders to tactical commanders based on their view of the situation along the Norwegian coast. The Admiralty now believed the Germans were attempting to break out into the Atlantic, while Forbes had come to the conclusion the Germans were in fact landing at Norway. Forbes felt it was time to resurrect initial British plans to land troops and fight the Germans ashore.<sup>14</sup>

The lack of an operational commander supplied with firm guidance and objectives made it impossible for the British to conduct joint operations or regain the initiative from the Germans. Under Churchill, the British chain of command concentrated on the tactical aspects of the operation from a strategic viewpoint. Churchill, himself, exclaimed after several tactical naval victories "in my view, which is shared by my skilled advisors, Herr Hitler has created a grave strategic

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>14</sup> Donald Macintyre, Narvik, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1959), pp. 30 - 34.

error."<sup>15</sup> However, sinking German warships attempting to return home did not prevent German success in Norway. The British soon discovered a vastly superior fleet could not operate successfully without air support and troops could not get ashore without the fleet. The Germans were able to dominate the air space over Norway which prevented the British from a successful counter attack.<sup>16</sup>

Accomplishing the naval objectives of Operation WESEREUBUNG (landing troops in Norway) formed the foundation for complete success for the Germans. While this paper has concentrated on the naval aspects of the operation, it was the German coordination among component commanders during the operation which defeated the Norwegians and the British. The Germans proved a nation did not need total command of the seas in order to accomplish their mission. They used outstanding planning, specifically the maritime portion, combined with surprise, synchronization and sequencing by all three services to outmaneuver and defeat the Norwegians and British.<sup>17</sup>

Operation WESEREUBUNG also demonstrated the benefits of unity of command. At the operational level, the Germans showed an excellent understanding of command and control. While the Germans lacked joint support at higher echelons, the component

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<sup>15</sup> Len Deighton, Blitzkrieg: From the Rise of Hitler to the Fall of Germany, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1979), p. 99.

<sup>16</sup> Maier, pp. 218 - 219.

<sup>17</sup> Milan N. Vego, "Naval Operational Art," Lecture notes, U.S. Naval War College, Newport, RI: 15 December 1994.

commanders in the operation coordinated actions with each other and never lacked unity of effort.<sup>18</sup> In contrast the British demonstrated severe deficiencies in this aspect of operational art throughout the operation.

#### **UNITED STATES: FUTURE**

What can the United States learn from German success achieved in Operation WESEREUBUNG? Strong and formidable, the US navy is unmatched on the seas and would garner respect even from Mahan for its technological prowess and capabilities. Prospects for the foreseeable future probably do not include a large naval battle. However, we must harbor against over confidence and operate in a manner which takes advantage of our strengths while understanding our weaknesses.

Our National Security Strategy calls for an enlargement of world market democracies while providing a deterrence and containing threats to the nation, our allies and our national interests.<sup>19</sup> To accomplish those tasks the United States must stay engaged throughout the world. One of the significant methods to accomplish this is through the military's forward presence and its ability to respond quickly to any crisis. In order to fulfill our strategic objectives, US forces have been stretched throughout the world. This possible over extension

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement, (Washington, 1994), p. 2.

provides opportunities for quick and aggressive actions similar to those taken by the Germans in 1940.

To continue to meet our objectives the US must apply its naval resources consistent with Corbett's theory of sea control and forget Mahan. Mahan called for the protection of a nation's commerce through a powerful and large navy, thereby ensuring full control of the seas.<sup>20</sup> There currently is no maritime threat to the US Navy or to the commerce which travels along its lines of communications. The potential threat is tied to regions where conflicts would directly impact our national interests, mostly economic based. It is in these regions where Corbett's theories applying to local command of the sea are relevant to the US.

There are some specific examples of operational art as demonstrated by the Germans which could effect US operations. First and foremost in planners and decision makers minds is the Arabian Gulf region. Stability in the Arabian Gulf and access to oil continues to be in our vital national interest. Yet there is an enormous threat building in the region. Iran has the potential to control access and influence events in the Arabian Gulf as it modernizes its military. With limited resources, Iran could alter US operations in the region unless we continue to operate jointly and smartly. Weapons of mass destruction and

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<sup>20</sup> Alfred T. Mahan, The Influence of Sea Power Upon History (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957), p. 121.

terrorism will also play a significant role in how we operate in this region.

Second, today's global economy places pressure on nations to seek influence and expand their control in their geographic regions. For example, China's navy has professionalized and modernized over the past few years. They now have the capability to apply Corbett's theories in an attempt to influence US actions with China in trade or diplomacy. The potential exists for conflict and the US must operate jointly in this region to ensure its national interests are protected. Access to all markets, especially in the Pacific, will continue to be in the US national interest.

Positive steps can be taken to counter the threats originating in these regions. The application of Information Warfare to understand the threat and its potential while protecting US resources and citizens is a key tool available to political and military leaders in the US. Protecting our information, whether it is economic, diplomatic or military, as well as understanding the world situation, will prevent the US from being surprised by something like Operation WESEREUBUNG. It must be applied down to the operational commander to ensure he has all the information and resources available to counter any threat. There will not be time or assets available to make



mistakes and misapply resources like the British did against the Germans.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Germans applied Operational Art very effectively in Operation WESEREUBUNG to defeat both the Norwegians and the British. By applying the principles of war and focusing on their objectives, the Germans were able to operationally defeat a numerically superior naval force. Germany maintained the initiative against Britain through the synchronization of its military forces in a joint operation and the application of a detailed plan. Germany was prepared for flaws in the plan and kept its focus on the mission. The British were unable to handle the situation and the opportunities presented to them and failed to create a coherent plan to counter the Germans.

Lessons learned from both sides of this operation and the entire Scandinavian campaign are still relevant to the US. Vacillation and lack of unity of command are detrimental to any operation even if the forces are superior to the adversary. As the US military continues to downsize, it is imperative that the forces operate jointly and rely on intelligence and technology to be a force multiplier. The US will be challenged in the future. Tom Clancy demonstrates great insight in his latest book Debt of Honor when he writes "(e)ven if you won the Super Bowl, there were

still teams to play against next season."<sup>21</sup> The United States must stay prepared and focused for any potential threat.

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<sup>21</sup> Tom Clancy, Debt of Honor (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1994), p. 39.

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